

#3: What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger

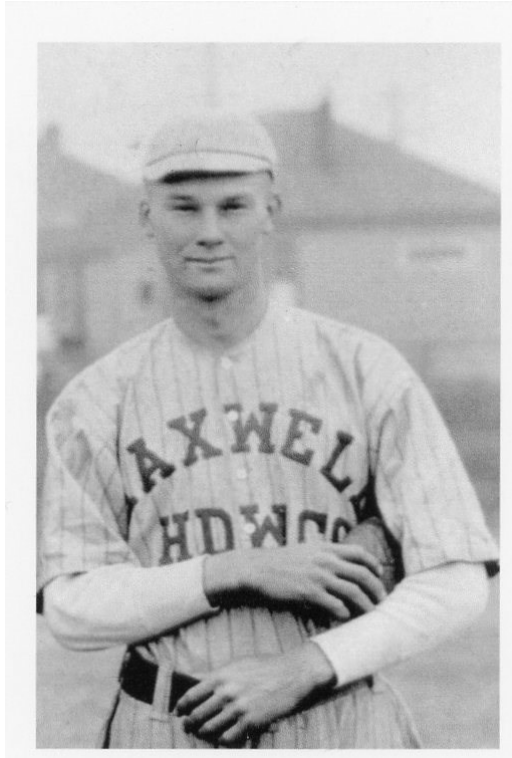
It's an old axiom but one that absolutely describes Del Webb's early years. Most people would have been devastated when the family's financial troubles hit, but not Del. He simply picked up his bat, glove, toolbox and went to work.

It was a trait he carried through life. His positive attitude and belief in his abilities served him well. He was driven, but he never let his success go to his head. He remained a humble, quiet man, focused on baseball through his teens and business once he gave up his glove.

The stories surrounding those early years are splintered. In the book, *Del Webb, A Man, A Company*, they are quick to say, what is printed is often repeated quips, perhaps enhanced in the retelling. He played in the Alameda Winter League and Standard Oil League. It states he joined "outlaw" leagues where he played under assumed names and met Ty Cobb.

At the age of 16, he became the team manager of the Modesto Merchants. In 1924, he convinced several of his baseball playing brothers to go to the Bank of Italy and buy stock with their baseball money. Unheard of in those days, for anyone other than well-heeled businessmen. Something he was quite proud of.

His wife Hazel, trained as an operating nurse, was willing to put up with his transient life of carpentry and roaming from town to town in an effort to make it to the big leagues. She stuck with him through it all. And I suspect, when the final catastrophe struck, she was his saving angel.



"Del's passion through his early teens and mid-twenties was clearly baseball. His carpenter skills paid the bills but his hope was always to be called up to the major leagues."

Del, at 6 foot 4 inches and 200 plus pounds was a strapping, healthy specimen. The average height of a male in the 1920's was 5'7", which had him towering over most. All of which makes the following story so compelling. The year was 1927 and his baseball team was scheduled to play an exhibition game against inmates at San Quentin Prison.

This was during Del's drinking days and he awoke late with a hangover and missed the boat that carried the rest of the team to the island prison. Del managed to get across the bay, but was dehydrated and asked a prisoner where the dressing room was and for a glass of water. He brought him a pitcher of water and a glass and that is where the story becomes tragic.

A few days later, Del became violently ill with a "particularly virulent case of typhoid fever." His weight fell below 100 pounds and he nearly died twice. He was in bed for 11 weeks and out of work for an entire year. Obviously having his own nurse on hand was a lifesaver for him.

There is little question, because we know Del Webb got off his deathbed, what didn't kill him made him stronger. Doctor's and friends told him, the weather in Phoenix would be better for his physical condition. The dry climate of Arizona was far better than the colder damp Northern California setting.



"Pictured is Del Webb and his lovely wife Hazel. This picture was obviously taken during better times than when he left California in 1928. Heading to Phoenix, he had an old beater of a car and \$100 he borrowed as a stake to get him started in the Valley of the Sun."

The story goes, in 1928 with his health back, he packed up his meager belongings (tools and glove), his wife Hazel, borrowed one hundred dollars and headed off to the Valley of the Sun. He was not aware the state was in an economic downturn, and even had he been, it probably wouldn't have deterred him.

The more I read about Del Webb, the more I come to understand why he succeeded when others failed. He was driven. He was never contented or satisfied by what he accomplished. He was always pushing to do more, be better. Ultimately, Arizona turned out to be the perfect place for him to flourish. The growth that was to come would all start locally, but that was just the beginning. The end of the twenties and the whole of the 30's would be explosive...but that's the story for next week.

Bill Pearson